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THE FUTURE OF OUR WATERFOWL

An address by Col. H. P. Sheldon, Chief, Division of Public Relations, U. S. Biological Survey, at the Fifteenth Annual Convention of the Izaak Walton League of America, Chicago, Ill., on April 30 1937

Only four or five years ago when members of the Biological Survey were engaged in despairing attempts to acquaint the public with the fact that the waterfowl were in acute danger and that some species were already on the verge of extinction these officers were regarded as being victims of chronic melancholia. Scores of letters were written to the Secretary of Agriculture, advising him of the fact and urging him to silence the gloomy lunatics. Now all that has been changed. Now everyone admits that the waterfowl have declined tremendously, but perhaps even now only a few realize how close these birds were to irremediable disaster in those years between 1930 and 1934. Public agreement on the subject is as nearly unanimous as it ever is on any matter of national importance, and only a few individuals who live in or visit the great concentration areas remain skeptical as to the extent and seriousness of the decrease. There is even a curious reversal of opinion, or at least a tendency toward this state of affairs, and we who a few years ago were so pessimistic as to be almost unbearable to our friends and associates are now inclined to nurse a faint but definite flicker of optimism amid the general gloom. I know that I must be careful not to seem too cheerful over the prospect as we see it now. It is very easy for an anxious parent to imagine that the first symptom of improvement in an ailing child constitutes an unconditional guarantee of complete recovery. We are apt to believe what we hope will be true. With respect to our invalid waterfowl resources we must keep constantly in mind the fact that our present gains, though positive, are slight and elementary.

Three years ago we were low in ducks and low in spirits. Today we have a few more ducks and much more hope for their future, but in a very real sense the patient must be kept in a suitable environment, nourished with an abundance of food and water, and guarded against the shock of long open seasons and shooting abuses for many years to come.

At the approach of the crisis I was one of the least eloquent but most earnest of those who went about, up and down the countryside, warning all who would listen of the disaster to come. Some of my experiences at that time were inspiring while others were filled with bitterness and disillusionment. I believe it may interest you to know my reasons for putting off now the deepest shade of mourning and looking with encouragement to the future. They are practical reasons, I assure you.

Since 1915 the Biological Survey had been striving by every means at its limited command to arouse the American public to the realization that the maintenance of the migratory waterfowl could never be insured by the regulation of shooting alone. Dr. E. W. Nelson was one of the first, I think, to point out that the preservation of waterfowl was a land utilization problem no less than it was a regulatory one. It is now understood by anyone who has given any thought at all to the business of wildlife management, that his formula, which for so many years found little enthusiasm or support, holds the basic philosophy governing the effort we must make.

Expressed in simplest terms it is this: In order to have waterfowl we must have waterfowl marshes and with the marshes we must have waterfowl to occupy them. If we were able to perform the impossible and restore immediately and completely every foot of those original areas inhabited by the waterfowl before the coming of white men they would still be utterly useless if populated only by the ghosts of birds gone long ago to fill the gunners' game bags. It is equally obvious that we may silence the guns forever and yet be forced to watch our birds vanish to extinction if we make no effort to restore and preserve areas possessing the environmental characteristics so vitally important to the waterfowl.

Until 1933 very little was done to activate either part of the waterfowl program. With the passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918 some scanty funds were appropriated each year to employ a few officers to enforce shooting restrictions to which a large number of the gunners were indifferent or antagonistic. It was the common experience of the Survey to find itself assailed on one hand by gunners who protested the severity of the restrictions and, on the other hand and at the same time, by the ultra conservationists who mistook weakness for cowardice and cursed the Survey for its apparent leniency.

While this state of affairs continued, even less interest was being taken in the waterfowl sanctuary program, and the funds allotted for this essential use were really negligible. It was during these years of debate and constant conflict that the greater part of some 15,000,000 to 20,000,000 acres of the finest duck breeding marshes in the United States were destroyed by drought and drainage, while, I suppose, some sardonic devil of frustration stood by and grinned to see how ably the real friends of wildlife managed to avoid any effective harmony of effort.

In that darkest hour many informed and practical men were convinced that the waterfowl were doomed and that the least painful way out of a condition long past all hope was to invoke a mercy death by taking off all shooting restrictions and turning the guns loose upon the dwindling remnants.

And then, somewhat more vociferously than the first breath of spring, came the great change. Its prophet and high priest was Jay N. Darling and he was supported by a public enthusiasm which actually seemed to have crystalized over night.

Money suddenly began to flow to extend and strengthen the enforcement arm of the Survey and to help in the enforcement of restrictions more drastic than any that preceded them. Resentment and criticism of the restrictions while never completely withdrawn (nor will they ever be) receded materially as sportsmen all over the country roused to the necessity of building up, by hook or by crook, an adequate supply of birds for breeding purposes. The courts were also aroused and by the imposition of adequate penalties upon violators of the Treaty Act regulations changed at once the attitude of the public toward those individuals who had thought it clever and commendable to rob the resource that is a property ordained by Nature to be administered-in-trust by all the people of this continent.

From various sources funds totaling about \$20,000,000 were placed in the hands of the Survey with instructions to go ahead with the establishment of a waterfowl sanctuary system in accordance with the plan advocated by Dr. Nelson nearly twenty years before. Thanks to the work already done by the scientists and technicians of the Bureau we were able to begin the program immediately.

The information gained by bird-migration and food-habits studies had been used to map a system of refuges so located that they would be of the greatest possible advantage to the birds and we were able to take up the tremendous task of land acquisition without delay. Since then in three short years the Survey has acquired by gift, purchase, Executive order, or otherwise, nearly 3,000,000 acres of land suitable for the purposes of our migratory waterfowl.

The program has been based on the theory that an adequate refuge area must exist in every important concentration region if the system is to be effective. The great bulk of the shooting of migratory waterfowl is carried on in this country, and it is necessary therefore not only to restore and repopulate our duck breeding grounds, but also to provide sanctuary while the birds are in migration and on their wintering grounds.

The total breeding area included in the marsh-restoration projects that we are carrying on at the present time is about 1,000,000 acres. This will produce many birds, but nevertheless the restoration of a million acres is not sufficient to bring back the days of long shooting seasons and large bags. If there are any who dream of the return of times when a gunner might legally shoot 25 or 50 birds a day over a season of three months they are indulging in vain hopes. I do not believe that that time is ever going to return. The best estimates concede that somewhere between fifteen and twenty million acres of the finest duck breeding marshes in the United States have been destroyed by drought and drainage. A large acreage in southern Canada has also been destroyed in the same way. We cannot hope to restore the conditions that existed when that whole territory was a great waterfowl nursery by the rehabilitation of 1,000,000 or 2,000,000 acres of marsh, although every acre restored will help us toward our objectives.

One of the advantages of this marsh-restoration program is that once it is accomplished the marshes will go on producing birds indefinitely if breeding stock is preserved. In other words, the investment that we are making and the efforts we are putting forth are not for today alone; the work will be productive many years from today, or for as long as these marshes remain.

It is impossible for me to attempt a description of the work being done on all of the 217 wildlife refuges now under administration by the Survey, and perhaps a very brief account of the operations on a typical refuge will suffice to give you an idea of what is being accomplished with the entire program.

The Souris Refuge in North Dakota is the one I have selected as furnishing an example of our restoration efforts. The two units of this refuge

will total about 80,000 acres of duck-producing marsh. A series of eight dams has been thrown across the river valley, and the two units, the Upper and Lower Souris, together control nearly 100 miles of the river bottom.

Formerly this was one of the great duck nurseries of the United States, but drainage and agricultural operations gradually destroyed its productivity. On the Upper Souris we have built a huge storage dam which will control 110,000 acre feet of water. This water will be stored during the spring run-off and used for maintaining the water level on the marshes below during the summer months. Below the big unit are six miles of marsh which, when well supplied with water, will be one of the finest nesting grounds in North America. On the Lower Souris over an area of some 50,000 acres a series of dikes will spread the water out into the channels, sloughs, and pot holes connected by ditches and canals, so that a good circulation of water will be maintained and a maximum growth of food and cover plants for the migratory waterfowl obtained.

This refuge may be even better as a duck nursery than it was under natural conditions. The dams are designed to flood the area only deep enough to leave many small islands for safe nesting sites. The waterfowl took advantage of these improvements at the earliest opportunity. Less than thirty days after the water was first stored in one of the units on this area ducks were nesting there and many thousand pairs of ducks nested on this refuge the first year of its operation, although it was far from an ideal duck nesting ground at that time. In order to bring these marshes to a high point of productivity in the shortest possible time, we gathered seeds and rootstocks of growths that will furnish food and cover and planted them before the units were flooded. In consequence, after only one year of existence this marsh is far along toward attaining a stabilized condition that will produce a maximum of food and cover for the birds. We look for the two Souris units to be of tremendous value.

There are five major refuges in North Dakota alone and a total of 70 small easement refuges. On 52 of these, actual development work has been done or is under way, and 32 of them are practically completed. Twenty more of these projects are well along toward completion, and work is being undertaken on the others as fast as time and money will permit. These easement refuges involve the use of privately owned lands, which the owners give us the right in perpetuity to flood, fence, and protect as migratory waterfowl refuges. The farmers in North Dakota are glad to grant these easements in return for the work we do in building the water control structures, which restore water to their dry lakes and marshes and furnish good watering places for their stock. The restoration of these areas should be of great help in tiding over drought conditions so prevalent in North Dakota in recent years. Many of these farmers take a great deal of pride in the work and have labored freely to help us.

The easement program has restored 100,000 acres of breeding marsh in units that vary from 500 to 15,000 acres. We are hoping to extend the same system to other States, and it is now actually under way in South Dakota. If we can add another half million acres of these easement refuges to the great northern prairie nesting area it will be a marvelous supplement to the existing major refuge units that now comprise nearly three quarters of a million acres of land.

I wish it were possible for each of you to visit our refuge areas and see just what is being accomplished for waterfowl restoration. I think that if we could show the sportsmen of this nation the work being done, or even tell them individually about it, the great majority would favor the program, including all necessary shooting restrictions, and would support it loyally. I believe they would see it as a really constructive effort, sound in theory and absolutely practicable in performance. This is the first time that any agency, Federal, State, or private, has ever had an opportunity to do anything constructive for the migratory waterfowl on a scale that is anywhere near adequate.

We are proud of the work we have laid out, but we are not out of the woods yet. In order to develop this program to the minimum basis that will give us real assurance that the birds will be protected and a breeding stock preserved, we still need 73 areas that we have not yet started to purchase, and we need to finish several other purchases now under way. These 73 areas are scattered over the country in the major concentration points and on the principal breeding grounds. The funds given us for the purchase of land are exhausted and the possibility of continuing this program depends entirely upon obtaining additional money with which to buy land. It will take, roughly, \$25,000,000 to buy the land and do the development work necessary to complete this minimum program that we consider essential. We do not think that is a great amount to invest in the future of the migratory waterfowl of this country. We are dealing with a resource capable of producing an annual return worth many times that sum. We know, too, that unless this constructive work can be continued we face a long and perhaps permanent cessation of shooting privileges. The time will come when the only alternative will be to close the season for a long period of years unless we are able to complete this program for the restoration of the environment that produces migratory waterfowl.

So far I have been describing the waterfowl restoration program to you in terms of money, lands, and birds. I have yet to discuss an influence which I know from long experience to be greater than any of these. In my opinion its presence in this program justifies our best hopes for ultimate success. It is the quality of leadership as exemplified by the present Chief of the Bureau of Biological Survey, who would, if he could, have been here to address you today. We know him as a quiet, intelligent, and tireless worker in the cause of wildlife conservation; one who will not be moved one degree from his carefully determined course by any influence under the sun save only that of reason. If there is any man on earth today who is capable of carrying out this tremendous program and restoring our resource of migratory waterfowl to the point where it is again a source of national pride rather than one of extreme anxiety he is the man who now has the task in charge--Dr. Ira Noel Gabrielson.

I am more optimistic of the outcome than I have ever been before, but I want to leave with you the plain warning that its success depends entirely upon how well the program is supported by the sportsmen and the conservationists of this nation. If we are able to get the money to purchase and restore the areas that we have staked out as a minimum program, and if we can then restore more breeding grounds as changing economic conditions make it possible and necessary, and if at the same time we can hold the total loss of birds from human take and from all other causes to less than the production each year, we are on our way out, and we can look forward to better years for the waterfowl.

